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ABSTRACT

An unavoidably ideological frame of reference in Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) exists and an unavoidably political job must be undertaken if Writing across the Curriculum is to escape being the handmaiden to the so-called content disciplines. Despite this, many teachers who work in the field do not see their task as emerging from a distinct ideological framework. Writing instructors must understand the conceptions about the nature of writing that are held by professionals in various disciplines. Recently, a number of studies have centered on the texts and writing processes of such professionals. A survey looking at the past five years of two scientific and engineering journals demonstrates a lively interest in how to teach discipline-specific writing skills, and this paper relates that survey to the goals and values of Writing across the Curriculum. Writing is a social act manifesting ethical character, a way of making meaning, but these assumptions currently favored by many writing instructors may not be shared by teachers of other disciplines. Examples from engineering and chemistry educators show contradictory notions about writing. Writing instructors must promote an understanding of the ways knowledge is formulated not through systematic methods of extracting it from the world, but through social discourse, which is an ideological task. (Some sample comments about writing from other disciplines are appended.) (HB)

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Presented in a
1992 CCCC Roundtable:
Writing Across the Ideologies
March 19, 1992

Beyond Evangelism: Ideology and Social Responsibility in WAC

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Beyond Evangelism: Ideology and Social Responsibility in WAC

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In this presentation I want to make explicit the argument that is implicit in the title of our session: that we have an unavoidably ideological frame of reference in Writing Across the Curriculum and an unavoidably political job to do if Writing Across the Curriculum is to escape being the handmaiden to the so-called content disciplines. The suggestion that we have a political task to face is certainly not an original idea with this presentation. David Russell made the same assertion in a 1990 essay in which he argued: "as with all movements to extend literacy, WAC has political, economic, and social consequences" (69). Toby Fulwiler and Art Young reiterated Russell's view in their afterword to their most recent book, Programs That Work. But what I wish also to call attention to in this presentation are indications that many of us who work in Writing Across the Curriculum are not seeing our task as emerging from a distinct ideological framework and requiring consciously political efforts in specific arena's of struggle. And as a consequence, many of the achievements claimed for WAC may prove to be Pyrrhic victories, entailing strategic losses for merely tactical gains.

In a review essay that appeared in College English last year, Charles Bazerman argued: "To survive and prosper, WAC must offer more than the conversion of every class into a writing laboratory; it must attach itself to the lifeblood of communication by means of which disciplines and professions organize themselves" (210). We are at the end of what Bazerman and others have called the first stage of WAC; we are entering a second stage, Bazerman says, "based on realistic assessment of the roles written language actually takes in disciplines and disciplinary classrooms" (209). In other words, it is essential to understand more clearly not only the forms and uses of writing in other disciplines, but specifically what professionals in those disciplines say about writing. Citing Chris Anson, Bazerman goes on to define "three domains of WAC research: the actual writing of the disciplines, the writing pedagogy in disciplinary classrooms, and the role of writing in the development of individual students" (210).

But it is essential that we should be clear as to the reasons for making this "realistic reassessment." Writing

CS213395

Across the Curriculum, after all, has been primarily a pedagogically-motivated project, not a research agenda. If we are now, in the second stage, moving into research projects it is because we need to understand much better than we have so far exactly what the practitioners of other disciplines actually do with written language, and how that writing relates to their professional ethos and the so-called content of their disciplines. We need to understand the conceptions about the nature of language and the skills of writing that are held by those professionals. We must find ways to assess the effect WAC has had on those who have been exposed to the workshops, seminars, literature, and converts (if there are any) to WAC principles within the various disciplines.

In fact, we have begun to see a number of valuable studies in recent years, both theoretical and empirical, of the texts and the writing processes of professionals in various disciplines. But what could we learn if we could catch these professionals discussing their ideas about writing and language among themselves. In a preliminary survey looking at the past five years of two scientific and engineering journals, I began to see that such discussions do take place particularly in articles about teaching discipline-specific writing skills to undergraduates in these disciplines. These are articles about teaching undergraduate engineering and chemistry students to do the kinds of writing required in their field. In this paper I will discuss that survey in relation to the goals and the values of Writing Across the Curriculum.

But again, let us be clear as to what it is the "Writing Across the Curriculum Movement," as it has been characterized by some of those exposed to WAC, has set out to achieve. I do not necessarily presume that WAC is in fact a monolithic enterprise. Nevertheless, a few scholars have emerged as the chief spokespersons and theoreticians for WAC, and chief among them may yet be Art Young and Toby Fulwiler. Young expressed the fundamental challenge for Writing Across the Curriculum in his 1984 essay, "Rebuilding Community in the English Department." Here I quote Young who says:

> Of course, skillful writing can be used in support of either liberal or servile education, as Richard Ohmann has reminded us. And when English faculties view it as a service industry, they treat it as a value-neutral activity of primary importance to the postindustrial state and of only secondary importance to the individual's search for knowledge and identity. When writing becomes a service industry, then the study, teaching, and learning of it become fractured, isolated, and servile within the English department and throughout the campus. When writing becomes a cornerstone of a liberal education, a humanistic activity for discovery and commitment, embraced as central to the English department's life and mission,

> then it nurtures and is nurtured by a community of scholars. (7)

Yet, in the notion of promoting the increased use of writing in the pedagogies of other disciplines there is nothing that inherently determines whether the writing will be viewed either as a value-neutral tool of the postindustrial state, or as a value-laden act of humanistic commitment. I am cynical enough to believe that there are those in our profession who are willing to function as obedient servants of other disciplines who demand that we cure the alleged "obvious deficiencies" in their students' writing. I am cynical enough to believe that there are those among us who will bow to the notion that by drilling Standard English grammar, spelling and syntax into the heads of students they will emerge with the ability to write with "clarity and grace." But I am also optimistic enough to believe that most of the scholars in our profession believe that writing is inevitably a social action. I am optimistic enough to believe that most of us understand with, Stephen Katz, that all writing manifests an "essentially ethical character" (272). To quote Art Young again, "We make meaning from writing...and the meaning we make shapes our values and our lives" (16). The latter beliefs have implications for our pedagogical practices in WAC--implications which have at times proven disturbingly problematic for WAC workshop consultants when they found themselves crossing the border into other disciplines. Some of those consultants I have spoken to have described the Writing Across the Curriculum effort as "evangelistic" and "subversive." The assumption of such WAC consultants seems to have been that by planting a few apparently innocent new concepts about writing among the teachers of other disciplines, the full social and epistomological implications of those concepts would soon permeate those teachers' thinking and make them converts to the liberal community of scholars. Indeed, Art Young argues that "teachers of composition and teachers in other disciplines share many assumptions about language and learning, thanks to a high rate of participation by both groups in the writing across the curriculum workshops and program" (18-19). It is from this perspective, then that I suggest we look at the assumptions about writing held by teachers in other disciplines as expressed in the articles they write about teaching writing in their fields. On the handout (see appendix), you can see some examples of statements made about writing in two such articles, one concerning writing in electrical engineering courses, and the other concerning writing in chemistry lab courses.

What I found intriguing, and puzzling, about these statements are the contradictory notions about writing which are expressed in a single article, and sometimes even in a single paragraph. While the chemistry article seems to display a better grasp of concepts consistent with current views in composition theory, it is significant that this article was second-authored by that university's director of

the writing across the curriculum program. Moreover, let me reiterate that both of these articles come from universities where WAC programs are in place, and both articles acknowledge the value of WAC for their own disciplines.

These examples are not given as criticisms of the particular WAC programs represented, nor, are they presented with the intent to question the effectiveness of the WAC concept as a whole. Rather, they are presented as evidence of the situation we are faced with as we go forward with Writing Across the Curriculum.

The question these examples raise for me is how can we explain the contradictory assumptions implicit, as well as explicit in these statements? First of all, it will be evident to most of you that many of the assumptions and statements in these articles are what would be regarded as common sense about writing and language in fields outside of composition theory. The notion that content and writing are separate concerns; the notion that language, when properly used, provides a clear window on reality; the notion that matters of style are superficial and perhaps primarily cosmetic; the notion that the only use for writing in science courses is to transmit information; the notion that knowledge is a matter of objective facts existing in the external world and waiting to be discovered. Yet along side these notions we find the same teachers expressing the understanding that writing is as much a process as it is a product; that writing is a way of learning; that effective writing reflects critical thinking; that language shapes consciousness.

I think it is evident, first of all, that what we are seeing in these examples are linguistic contact zones; encounters between the communities represented by different academic disciplines, with their often conflicting notions of the world and of language. But I am afraid that these encounters may not be matters that can be negotiated in the spirit of mutual liberality and intellectual inquiry. As Marilyn Cooper has argued, many academic discourse communities are grounded in foundationalist assumptions. Cooper says:

> Discourse communities, like Standard English and cultural literacy, can function as a set of external standards that are used to control and constrain the immediate discourse, legitimating the discourse of those who are members...and silencing those who are not. (211)

An essential part of our task in writing across the curriculum must be to find ways not only to promote writing in other disciplines, but to promote an understanding of the ways knowledge is formulated not through systematic methods of extracting it from the world, but through social discourse. Certainly this is a difficult and delicate task. It is, as we have tried to argue in this panel, an ideological task. As Charles Bazerman has advised, we must avoid the polemics of "unwarrantedly hegemonic discourse" (211). We must recognize that to the extent we are

contending with foundational discourse communities we are in an ideological struggle over what Gramsci describes as psychological validity. Ideologies in this sense, as Gramsci says, "create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position...etc" (377). And what makes our task still more difficult is that, from our perspective, in terms of practice, WAC remains a teacher-centered endeavor. At best, we have only limited access to the students in the other disciplines' classrooms. In effect, *our* students are the *teachers* of the other disciplines, individuals with deeply vested interests not only in the perspectives they represent but in the ways they represent them. Our task must be understood to include what Cooper calls for in the English Department writing class: to tell them why we value the ideas and principles we value, and listen to our students when they explain their values to us; to discuss the functions that are served by genres and terminologies; and finally, to show them how new genres and terminologies emerge "by translating our discourse into their language as often as we force them to translate their discourse into our language" (220). We must do this, because, as Cooper warns, "consciously or not, what we do both in our teaching and in our theory affects who has the power to engage in academic discourse and who does not" (217).

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Appendix

Some Examples of What Teachers in Other Disciplines Say to Each Other About Writing

Electrical Engineering Teachers

"Writing is meant to be read."

"A good technical writer uses simple sentences and simple words, remembering that the goal of writing the paper is to communicate."

"Laboratory report writing can be made less intimidating and time consuming by providing word processor report templates so writers can concentrate on style and grammar and thereby produce more readable and meaningful reports."

Although the content of a technical report may be complicated, the style should be simple."

"The complementary use of [lab] notebooks and reports result in more productive students, who we fully expect to become more productive engineers."

[lab notebooks should display] "no ambiguity or question of authenticity."

"Requiring good writing as a part of good engineering resulted in...improved critical thinking skills, and more student confidence."

"The first report of the sophomore course was written almost entirely for the student. The results were omitted, and empty tables and graphs were included for students to complete....These reports were graded equally on technical writing and on engineering content....They were learning much more, and enjoying it."

From IEEE Transactions on Education Vol.34. No. 1, Feb. 1991

Chemistry Teachers

"A...problem initially was the attitude that a draft just meant extra work and why should writing count in a laboratory course anyhow. We have minimized this objection by making communication an explicit segment of the course, as significant as any experiment, and carrying considerable weight (about 20% in the first course and 30% in the second, although is is misleading to imply that a communications aspect is really separate from the experimental results)."

"We have learned that writing quality is often not a matter of minor stylistic variations that are beyond our understanding but actually involve often significant omissions or inclusions that betray a student's inadequate sense of self as a scientist....In other words, these are problems that students are having understanding what it means to be a chemist."

"[Chemistry] faculty have often felt uncomfortable in evaluating writing style."

"[Chemistry] faculty...have been concerned most strongly with correct chemistry but have attempted to stress good writing and proper format as well."

"[Chemistry] faculty graders have noted significantly improved writing compared to similar reports written before this system was introduced. They feel that they can better evaluate the scientific arguments presented and that the students are writing more effectively. Successive reports clearly show that consultant suggestions on style are having a positive effect."

From Journal of Chemical Education Vol. 68. No. 2, Feb. 1991.